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Coming in from the cold

The defection of a top KGB espionage official in Britain resulted in the expulsion from England of 25 Soviets he apparently identified as spies. That was really just a gesture; the man had been acting as a double agent for years and presumably he has had more to share than the identity of people acting for the KGB under the thin disguise of official cover.

It was a decent gesture, though, in more ways than one. Some of the people to be expelled had diplomatic immunity, which in the world of intelligence covers a lot of sins. But others were not protected and could have been imprisoned, as their Western counterparts very well might have been if they had been caught out in the cold behind the Wall. The Soviet Union responded predictably by throwing out 25 British citizens from Moscow, not for reasons of counterintelligence but just because that is how they play the game.

In effect, the defection in London was the end of an operation rather than the beginning. Apparently the KGB official had been summoned back to Moscow and sought protection because he feared that he finally had been discovered.

There is something curious about these cases. The discovery of a spy in one's midst summons up all sorts of angry feelings. That is common enough in all kinds of criminal betrayal. But, of course, in this instance the betrayed party is also attempting to suborn the same kind of conduct himself. The practice of espionage is not a communist monopoly.

What is different is not the means so much as the ends. The means of espionage themselves tend to be moderated in the West out of respect for the humane values they are deployed to defend. But the ends—in the one case an idea of freedom and in the other a structure of systematic repression—are so divergent that the machinations of intelligence agents, which fit so uncomfortably with the ideals of Western nations, do not embarrass the Soviets in the slightest.

The ugly world of espionage is like a miniature model of the Soviet system of government, which operates by threat, secrecy, coercion and betrayal. When it is introduced by Soviet agents into the West, it is like a virus that the healthy organism of a free state will naturally go to fevered lengths to throw off.